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## Exploring Intercultural Communication Perceptions Among English Education Students at Cenderawasih University, Papua-Indonesia

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### Abstract

*This study aims to identify the difficulties in intercultural communication experienced by students of the English Language Education Department (ELED) with lecturers (teaching staff) and fellow students in the ELED environment of Cenderawasih University. This study uses a social phenomenology approach that focuses on the perceptions and experiences of 20 English language students selected based on stratified purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews centered on three sensitization concepts: intercultural sensitivity (IS), intercultural communication competence (ICC), and intercultural learning (IL). Data were analyzed using a qualitative approach. The findings are organized into themes that explain differences in ethnic origin culture, effective intercultural perceptions, communication with lecturers, and better communication between English peers. This study supports the existing literature on intercultural communication and provides recommendations for teaching staff at ELED to foster an inclusive multicultural environment.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, English students, perceptions, experience, peers*

### INTRODUCTION

Human contact dynamics have evolved as a result of globalization. Information technology and mass media foster direct communication that cuts through time and geographical barriers and promote cross-cultural interaction. The younger generation, including students, are needed to master 4 competencies of 21st century life skills, including: critical thinking, creative thinking, the ability to collaborate, and communication. We are in an era of globalization and the beginning of the 21st century.

The two 21st century competences that are most pertinent to our study are two of the four. In the previous four years, the learning trend at Cenderawasih University's Teacher Training and Education Faculty has seen the number of enthusiasts grow from one study group to three study groups. Nearly 500 students have registered for the English Department from 2019 to 2023, and they represent many ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds from all throughout Indonesia as well as from nearby nations (PNG).

Intercultural interactions are undoubtedly influenced by this circumstance on campus. The contacts and information sharing on multicultural campuses are not always successful, despite the fact that the ethnic and cultural diversity of English-speaking students enriches the academic environment with diverse perspectives.

Intercultural contact is a daily occurrence for students on a varied campus and cannot be avoided. Intercultural communication is necessary since meetings with people from other cultures are common in student interactions and cannot be avoided (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Ting-Toomey, 2018). Cultural differences have a significant impact on the interaction process in intercultural communication; students from different cultures will interact in other ways, of course, but it is hoped that these cultural differences won't be used as a barrier to the interaction process in different cultures (Gudykunst, 2021; Kim, 2017). Members of groups with diverse cultures must interact and communicate with one another, whether or not they are acquainted. The reality of life shows that we do not only interact with people from one ethnicity but also with people from other ethnicities.

Due to linguistic difficulties as well as a wide range of ideas, values, and behaviors, people (students) encounter difficulties while attempting to communicate and negotiate meaning in a multicultural environment (Ou & Gu, 2020). Previous studies have shown that overseas students encounter a variety of challenges when transitioning to their new environment, which results in psychological anguish and academic challenges (e.g., Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Samovar et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2001). Additionally, international students undergo identity adjustments while adapting to different cultural norms and communicative styles (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Interaction happens when people come into contact with others from different cultural backgrounds, and this contact results in a feeling of physical and psychological discomfort that is known as culture shock. Culture shock is characterized by ongoing uneasiness brought on by the absence of familiar cues and symbols in social interactions. These signs or instructions include a thousand and one ways that we control ourselves in dealing with everyday situations (Haluani, 2017).

This is one example of the case, which arises naturally with migrant students from different regions and tribes in Indonesia who are studying in the English department at the Teaching Faculty of Cenderawasih University. Students from outside the Papua region and from the regencies in Papua, which encompass about 24 districts, become strangers in a new environment due to their diverse cultural origins. This kind of environment can lead to a number of unpleasant things, including dread, inferiority, embarrassment, homesickness, and even cultural shock. Immigrant students in the English Department (ED) may find it challenging to adjust to their new surroundings due to differences in culture, ethnicity, and language or dialect spoken. As a result of the loss of signals or symbols that have evolved into a person's routines in social interactions or dealing with other people, this will produce anxiety, psychological pressure, and scholastic failure. Students from outside Papua and other areas in Papua must strive to start adapting to the new culture in the ED environment, notably adapting to communication, due to cultural variations in language, customs, traditions, norms, and even behavior. English is intercultural.

Based on theoretical principles of intercultural communication, this research focused on three sensitization concepts: intercultural sensitivity (IS), intercultural communication competence (ICC), and intercultural learning (IL). These concepts are critical to effective intercultural practice in multicultural environments because they include awareness of others, appreciation of diversity, and skills and knowledge for dealing with intercultural events. Therefore, this study aims to answer two research questions: a) How do students majoring in English view daily intercultural communication practices from official Department, Faculty, and University sources (lecturers, department heads, academic staff, colleagues, and leaders faculty)? and, b) what intercultural communication practices from official departmental, faculty, and university sources reflect intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence, and intercultural learning?

## Literary Review

### Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is defined as the study and practice of interaction between members of different cultural backgrounds (Bennett, 2013). Often, individuals are not aware of their own culture until they encounter another culture (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2020). This is because cultural norms invisibly permeate thoughts and actions, at an unconscious level (Deardorff, 2019). The symbolic code1 provided by the environment is obtained and applied automatically without question. However, exposure to different cultural norms may force individuals to reconsider other possibilities for creating meaning. Therefore, intercultural encounters trigger cognitive processes that make individuals sensitive to cultural belonging and aware of each other's differences. Culture influences the way humans select and interpret information (Ou & Gu, 2020).

A multicultural society not only includes people of different nationalities, but also includes domestic geographic boundaries (e.g., south or north), different cultural views between organizations (e.g., human rights culture, police culture, political parties, etc.), and the boundaries set within the organization (e.g., security personnel, engineers, IT Department, etc.). Additionally, multicultural societies include diverse groups that are limited by age, gender, and sexual orientation (Haluani, 2017). However, this research focuses on multiculturalism between individuals of different nationalities in the academic environment.

### Intercultural Communication Competence

In addition to IS, intercultural communication competency (ICC) is a key idea. An individual can effectively communicate in multicultural settings and interpret information from many cultural viewpoints using a set of skills known as ICC. (Jacson, 2022). Intercultural competence is defined as "the ability to realize and apply intercultural sensitivity". Hall argues that miscommunication between cultures is the result of different norms and rules that apply simultaneously (Dervin., 2021). In this scenario, interacting people interpret other people's messages and behavior based on their own cultural rules and not from the other person's perspective. Therefore, the ICC seeks mechanisms to overcome cultural misunderstandings and differences of opinion, which are critical to developing solid human relations. Therefore, IS and ICC are relevant to this research because they influence and encourage effective intercultural communication practices (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2020).

ICC requires the acquisition and practice of certain components and skills to successfully experience intercultural encounters. For example, an intercultural competent communicator has a positive attitude towards different cultures and is driven by the motivation to achieve certain goals (Samovar et al., 2019). ICC also requires cognitive flexibility to expand knowledge about other cultures. This allows effective communicators to obtain information about the values, norms, worldviews, language, and problem-solving methods of other cultures and, therefore, proceed with intercultural awareness.

### **Intercultural Learning**

Another sensitive concept for this research is intercultural learning (IL). Intercultural communication skills can be learned before multicultural meetings, known as IL. Bennett (2013b) defined this type of learning as “the acquisition of general (transferable) intercultural competencies” (p. 15). IL has been shown to provide positive outcomes for business travelers, immigrants, and students, Holmes, (2020). This increases the individual's self-confidence, thereby enhancing intercultural experiences.

Several cultural training methods can help gain intercultural competence. Some examples include, learning the language of a foreign country, interacting with members of the host community, exercises where an individual responds to different hypothetical scenarios and misunderstandings, analysis of misunderstanding episodes, table games, etc.. Byram, (2020). However, IL involves awareness of differences and sensitivity to others' perceptions. For example, learning a foreign language and reading guidebooks helps interactions but fails to understand another culture's perspective, its norms, and its construction of meaning, Hofstede, (2021). In addition, other symbol systems are difficult to decipher, such as gestures, customs regarding physical contact, authority relationships, management of time and space, etc. Thus, learning about historical context and cultural norms facilitates deeper understanding of other groups.

### **Barriers that interfere with intercultural communication**

Various obstacles can arise from intercultural interactions. These barriers interfere with effective message delivery and can exacerbate ICC, Samovar et al., (2019). For example, humans experience stress when participating in unknown situations. Uncertainty can produce negative attitudes and behavior toward unfamiliar circumstances, objects, or people. Likewise, adverse impacts can occur during intercultural interactions when there is a lack of knowledge about other cultures. Historically, humans avoided contact with people who were different or tried to change them to fit their culture. For example, religious missionaries always try to change other people's beliefs, Bennett, (2013). Unfortunately, a lack of self-awareness of one's own cultural behavior and low levels of intercultural competence have led to ethnocentrism, withdrawal, prejudice, stereotyping, and racism, Samovar et al., (2019).

Ethnocentrism can be defined as a series of behaviors and attitudes that consider one's own culture to be correct and superior to other cultures. In practice, ethnocentrism influences ethnic conflict, consumer choices, political elections, and everyday interactions with outgroups, Chen & Starosta, (2019). For example, Americans may perceive Chinese tourists as rude and impolite because they speak loudly. Likewise, ethnocentric consumers may view purchasing foreign-made products as unpatriotic and harmful to the domestic economy Samovar et al., (2019). Although society plays a large role in ethnocentric perceptions, empirical research also

shows that ethnocentric attitudes stem from strong individual input and in many cases occur quickly and unnoticed even when group membership may be detrimental to the individual or there is no opportunity for reciprocity, (Bennet, 2013; Samovar et al., 2019; Holmes, 2020).

## **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore English-major students' perceptions of intercultural communication in academic settings. A stratified purposive sampling method was applied, selecting 20 participants across different academic levels to ensure diverse perspectives. Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexible discussions while maintaining a focus on key themes like intercultural sensitivity, communication competence, and learning. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with transcriptions reviewed and categorized based on emerging patterns. The research employed Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This method helped identify key themes related to students' experiences and intercultural interactions. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and participant confidentiality, were strictly observed, and triangulation was used to ensure data validity. Reliability was ensured through careful documentation and member checking, where participants reviewed the findings to confirm accuracy and avoid researcher bias.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Cultural differences from home town**

Several officials or lecturers in the English department come from various provinces in Indonesia. There are 15 active English lecturers, 7 of whom are senior lecturers and three of them have the title of Professor. There are 8 lecturers who are still relatively young or considered juniors. The official English Department lecturer staff currently consists of 7 people from Papua, 3 people from Java, 3 people from Maluku, one from West Nusa Tenggara, and one from North Sulawesi. Meanwhile, the number of students who were the subjects of this research consisted of 20 people, with the distribution of their ethnic origins being: 4 students came from Wamena (mountainous area), 2 people from Biak, 2 people from Serui, 3 people from Java, 5 people from Bugis - Makassar, 2 people from Maluku, and 2 people from East Nusa Tenggara. In other words, there were 8 participants from Papua especially from highland and 12 students from outside Papua.

Some English Student (ES) participants consider male lecturers to be more lenient and permissive than female lecturers. For them, male lecturers seem to be more flexible and understanding in terms of deadlines and understanding. Therefore, students feel more comfortable approaching male lecturers and asking for accommodations and extensions of time compared to when they face female lecturers. When 15 or 75% student participants were asked for their opinion about time (turning in assignments, going to lectures, etc.), they admitted that some lecturers were stricter and deadlines could not be postponed. Regarding communication or consultation with guardian lecturers (GL), all participants stated that they were well served by their GL, but 3 (15%) ES participants stated that they were scolded by their GL. At the same time, they also understand why they were scolded because they exceeded the agreement time limit for consultation”.

Some English students perceive male lecturers as more lenient and flexible than female lecturers, particularly regarding deadlines.

Male lecturers are viewed as more approachable for extensions, while female lecturers are seen as stricter. Despite this, students report positive communication with their guardian lecturers. Although 15% of students mentioned being scolded by their guardian lecturers for exceeding consultation time limits, they understood the reasons behind it. These findings highlight gender-based perceptions in intercultural communication with authority figures, affecting how students approach lecturers (Holmes, 2020; Halualani, 2017; Deardorff, 2019).

#### **Effective intercultural communication with campus officials**

Participants were asked to describe their communications with campus officials (English lecturers, program heads, department heads, administrative staff) with whom they had good relationships. Their descriptions, impressions, and thoughts make it easier to understand their perceptions of effective intercultural communication from official campus sources. Consequently, this theme answers research questions based on positive viewpoints and examples when campus officials practice IS, ICC, and IL.

Participants who came from areas outside Papua (or are often called immigrants) talked about lecturers who they considered as mentors and who they felt comfortable discussing various topics. They admitted that the lecturer involved them in analytical thinking and discussions about lectures, about various things in a very enjoyable way. These interactions demonstrate that English majors maintain effective communication with their attending campus officials and engage in conversations that extend beyond academic topics. Additionally, communication was considered effective when campus officials allowed ED students to approach them and were willing to listen to them and provide feedback. As said by students whose parents were immigrants (but who were born and raised in Papua), "apparently, communication is about listening."

ELED students admitted that they faced various challenges when moving to another location far from home, especially those from mountainous areas. Many of them experienced culture shock when trying to assimilate and adapt to the new environment and overcome language barriers (Zhang & Lin, 2020; Smith, 2022; Halualani, 2017). Their impression of effective communication requires others to understand that their needs are different from those of immigrant students. Therefore, their linguistic barriers, accents, social norms, learning styles, and legal requirements are different. For example, they (highland students) tend to avoid communicating in English with friends or lecturers because they are worried that they will not be able to follow the communication fluently. "We are embarrassed to use English with lecturers or with immigrant friends, afraid of saying the wrong thing, so we join friends who come from the mountains." They also prefer to socialize and group with their friends who come from highland areas. These findings are consistent with research on intercultural communication, where students from marginalized or rural backgrounds often experience heightened anxiety when interacting in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural settings (Deardorff, 2019; Holmes, 2020; Kim, 2017). Linguistic barriers and social isolation contribute to a feeling of exclusion, impacting their academic and social integration (Jackson, 2022; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2020).

#### **Intercultural Mindset**

Twenty students from Universitas Cenderawasih's English Department participated in a study that investigated their perceptions of "intercultural sensitivity" in relation to classroom communication and English language culture. All pupils paid close

attention in class when the lecturer utilized Indonesian when they were asked about cross-cultural communication. But when English was utilized, just 5 (25%) students regularly comprehended the material, 7 (35%) students occasionally understood, and 8 (40%) students reported completely not knowing. Eighteen (90%) of the students thought the instructors' communication was good, and two (10%) thought it was very good. The majority of students clarified that they only rated the communication as "good" because the lecturer utilized English the entire time, which led to sporadic comprehension. Just four (20%) of the students who were asked if they raised questions or sought clarification during the lecture indicated that they needed more specific information. Despite not comprehending, the remaining 16 pupils (80%) chose not to ask questions, citing shame and fear as a result of their poor English. After class, they turned to their peers for assistance instead.

These findings highlight key dimensions of intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity, particularly in a classroom setting where language barriers impact understanding. The students' reluctance to seek clarification illustrates a lack of cultural self-awareness and confidence, which hinders effective communication. The majority of students preferred not to engage with the lecturer, showing a deficiency in openness and curiosity—essential traits in navigating intercultural interactions (Kim, 2020; Hofstede, 2021; Ward & Furnhan, 2001). The students' hesitation to ask questions, driven by fear of judgment, also reflects a lack of empathy and adaptability, as they struggle to accommodate new linguistic challenges and adapt their behaviors to fit a cross-cultural classroom setting (Halualani, 2017). Moreover, this behavior shows limited tolerance for ambiguity, as students tend to avoid engaging with the unknown (English language use) in the classroom. In intercultural settings, ambiguity is inevitable, and developing a tolerance for it is critical for effective learning and communication (Ward et al., 2001). Finally, the strategy of relying on peers for explanations outside the classroom, while pragmatic, suggests that students are not fully developing their intercultural knowledge and linguistic skills, thus limiting their growth in English language proficiency and intercultural competence.

#### **Time and Attendance**

When research participants described interactions with campus officials, they often used time adverbs such as every day, usually, always, never, and so on. This is because participants associated positive relationships and effective communication with the time spent with campus officials, frequent conversations, daily interactions, frequent trips to department offices, and extracurricular time spent by campus officials to help students (Jackson, 2021; Kim, 2020). Thus, time is considered an indicator that influences the intercultural communication practices of campus officials and even students themselves. For example, migrant participants from outside Papua and students from highland groups described their relationships with campus officials as "good" (Smith, 2022; Chen & Starosta, 2019). They stated that they met almost every day with lecturers, especially the advisor (Gudykunst, 2021; Ting-Toomey, 2020).

Getting used to (English) accents and cultural patterns takes time and practice. All participants described their initial experiences as difficult due to language barriers related to vocabulary acquisition and constant uncertainty (Spencer-Oatey, 2021; Zhang & Lin, 2020). However, over time, their communication improved as they learned from the host language culture (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018; Hofstede, 2021). Likewise, lecturers with greater

intercultural communication competence appeared to be knowledgeable and experienced, values that developed over time and exposure to intercultural events (Deardorff, 2020; Bennett, 2019).

### **Intercultural miscommunication with campus officials (Lecturers)**

The previous three themes looked at ELED students' perceptions of effective intercultural communication from department sources and factors that influence successful interactions in a multicultural environment. However, the participants also experienced events that still needed improvement. Therefore, this theme addresses students' perceptions of ineffective intercultural interactions with campus or department officials and aims to answer the research questions (i.e., how do ELED students perceive everyday intercultural communication practices from official campus sources? campus/department officials reflect IS, ICC, and IL?) from different perspectives.

This research shows that intercultural miscommunication in the academic environment occurs due to several obstacles including lack of knowledge about other cultures, poor intercultural learning, negative feelings towards intercultural events, limited curriculum materials, misguided perceptions, and an impersonal learning environment (for example, online learning and large classrooms). For some students, linguistic barriers and accent are the most prominent factors influencing effective communication. This is the first thing they mention when talking about communication, more than other cultural elements such as traditions, behavior, manners, interactions, communicative patterns, worldview, etc. For example, a group of participants from mountainous areas talked about having difficulty understanding English when they first learned English on campus. They also admitted that it was difficult to understand the lecturer because "his accent was strong and felt different". On the other hand, campus officials or lecturers also find it difficult to get used to the accents of local students.

The findings of this study highlight the major intercultural communication barriers in the academic environment at Cenderawasih University, mainly due to lack of cultural knowledge, inadequate intercultural education, and negative attitudes towards intercultural events. As Bennett (2019) and Deardorff (2020) explain, inadequate exposure to other cultures hinders an individual's ability to navigate and engage effectively in a multicultural context, creating gaps in communication and understanding. In addition, limited curriculum materials and impersonal learning environments, such as large classrooms and online learning, further exacerbate the challenges faced by students, as emphasized by Chen & Starosta (2019), who argue that personalized and culturally responsive instruction is essential to enhancing intercultural competence. Linguistic barriers, particularly accent, also emerged as a significant barrier, with students from mountainous areas struggling to understand lecturers' accents, echoing Kim's (2020) observation that unfamiliar accents are often perceived as a major communication barrier. The difficulties faced by students and lecturers in adapting to each other's accents further support Hofstede's (2021) statement that linguistic nuances are closely related to cultural identity, which influences how individuals perceive and interact in intercultural environments.

### **Talking about culture in class (Intercultural Learning)**

Globalization and technology have significantly changed the demographics of classrooms and transformed them into

multicultural environments (Samovar et al., 2019). Cultural diversity contributes to the exchange of information and diverse perspectives, while also presenting challenges for students, faculty and administrative staff. Apart from language barriers, other factors require careful handling in multicultural classrooms such as differences in learning styles, student-teacher relationships, thinking patterns, and social norms (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2021; Holmes, 2020; Samovar et al., 2019). This theme was developed based on participants' answers to the question, "Can you think of an experience when a lecturer, or teaching assistant started a class discussion about a different culture?" "How do you feel when the lecturer presents this topic to the class?" "Do you think conversations about culture encourage diversity in campus?" and why?"

Many participants felt that talking about culture in the classroom facilitated students' adaptation to their new residence far from their hometown, as well as their engagement with the international community. Additionally, it promotes intercultural learning among domestic students. Some participants believed that incorporating intercultural discussions and intercultural content into the curriculum would increase interactions on a multicultural campus because students would become more open and ready to experience intercultural events. As what the students stated in answering the questions related to this topic:

*"We are both excited and proud because this topic allows us to reflect on our own cultural identities and learn about others. It also creates an open space for sharing and understanding, which helps build a more inclusive classroom environment. We believe that conversations about culture promote diversity on campus. These discussions make students more aware of the different cultural perspectives that exist in our community, and foster a sense of respect and appreciation for differences. It also helps break down barriers and reduce stereotypes, so that students from different backgrounds can connect and collaborate more effectively. This is essential to creating a campus that values and celebrates diversity."*

Students' opinions on multicultural learning plans in ELED demonstrate a strong understanding of the importance of intercultural education in creating an inclusive and harmonious learning environment. Students expressed feelings of joy and pride because the topic of multiculturalism allows reflection on their own cultural identity while providing an opportunity to learn about other cultures. This is in line with the concept of cultural awareness, which is a key element in intercultural learning, where self-awareness of one's own and others' cultures is essential to prevent miscommunication and enhance cross-cultural interactions, Bennett, (2019) & Deardorff, (2020).

Students also believe that such discussions help reduce stereotypes and break down barriers that often separate individuals from different backgrounds. This is especially important in the context of intercultural learning, as stereotypes are often a major barrier to effective cross-cultural communication, Ting-Toomey, (2012) & Kim, (2020).

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study revealed valuable insights into how Cenderawasih University students perceive intercultural communication in the English Department. Based on the concepts of intercultural

sensitivity (IS), intercultural communication competence (ICC), and intercultural learning (IL), this study highlighted students' frequent interactions with campus officials and host culture. These encounters provided a variety of impressions and communication experiences that effectively answered the research questions. Positive perspectives emerged regarding campus officials' practices regarding IS, ICC, and IL, indicating generally favorable perceptions among English students. However, this study also identified areas for improvement, particularly regarding intercultural misunderstandings that led to negative experiences with campus officials. These challenges indicate the need for strategies to effectively manage conflict. Furthermore, promoting discussions about culture in the classroom encourages open dialogue and increases students' engagement in intercultural learning, which enriches their academic experience.

## Recommendations

To improve intercultural communication, the curriculum should integrate intercultural learning components. Educators should receive training to facilitate effective cultural discussions and promote respectful interactions. In addition, administrative and educational staff must actively engage with students about their culture, helping them adapt and build relationships with the local community while fostering an inclusive campus environment.

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